# *Responsibility to the Sign*

*Marion Montgomery*

*"I learned from Dr. West the importance of steady witness—learned that only when I have lived in the steadying presence of past witness to the truth of things, with fear and wonder and awe—am I likely to exorcise my own propensity to intellectual and spiritual pride...."*

IT WAS ON a fall afternoon in 1947 that I found him in a dark office in Park Hall. (It had a southeastern exposure and so was shadowed.) A famous building, locally, it was built with Federal funds in the 1930s under the fiction that it was to be a "home economics" building. Once inspected and approved by Federal authorities, its plumbing and other fixtures were reoriented, and it became home to the Classics Department, Modern Foreign Languages, and the English Department—with room left over. At least that was the story. At that time the Classics Department had two members. The English Department, with the first of its "teaching assistants," must have numbered an astonishing fifteen. It was already under pressure from returned war veterans, ignorant of the niceties of subject-verb agreement and the like esoteric foundations of formal learning.

That afternoon I ventured into a presence with a growing reputation on the campus for his integrity in service to his responsibility to the sign—a responsibility to the word rightly taken and rightly used in the light of history. Robert Hunter West, Professor of English, "authority" on Shakespeare and Milton, but of most interest locally as authority on the occult. He was already famous (locally) for fierceness in resisting corruptions of our language, especially severe on distortions of logic through careless grammar and syntax. He was deadly on papers using passive voice in a cowardly way, or on the sloppiness of phrases like "different than." At issue were principles rooted in the ordinate dependence in a hierarchy of concern, from grammar to logic to rhetoric, upon which a right use of words depends. But the specific malady—passive voice, pronoun reference, and the like—could hardly appear to the increasingly "professional" fragmentation of academic authority as rooted any more deeply than in accidental incident.

Little wonder that a "professional" scholar in a discipline other than "English," impressed by the notoriety of such integrity as his would increasingly turn to the "English Department" for authorization on where to place a comma in a professional paper destined for some prestigious journal, on which his pending promotion pivoted in the minds of an increasingly uncertain administration. With advances in technology—soon departments were connected by telephones—the English Department was at hand. Any passing teaching assistant in English became instant authority, sufficient to the comma's moment, by virtue of answering the ringing phone with "English Department."

And so it was with an ambiguous awkwardness that I stood in his door that fall

afternoon, a second-quarter freshman ignorant of commas and conjunctions, to say nothing of the metaphysical conceits he would eventually introduce to me. That was nearly fifty years ago, but I remember the sheaf of papers in my hand, or more probably in both hands—held forward as if an offering toward passage. He responded to my knock, inviting me in, but I hesitated just past the threshold. He sat behind a cranky old typewriter at peril on its rickety stand and peered at me through what I took to be scholarly round spectacles. He was already balding, though fifty years ago he must have been younger than I can now imagine him ever to have been. Perhaps my green presence in that office made him old. Anyway, I was aware of bookshelves lining the walls, floor to ceiling, filled with more books than I thought possible for one person to own, let alone read. I'd grown up in the presence of the Bible as our family library, but mainly with the Sears, Roebuck annual catalogue, though I had already started a library of my own. My first purchase, a little earlier, had been *Reptiles of the World*, to which I had added two or three paperbacks on the esoteric art of taxidermy. More recently, I had subscribed through a newspaper ad to the "Classics club" volumes.

Unlike my mint-new classics (*Dialogues of Plato*, a Dickens novel), Dr. West's books were in old severe bindings, their titles faded into fading spines. But on his desk by the typewriter, encouragement: stacks of new paperbacks, interspersed by an occasional hardback in loud dust jackets that were just coming into academic fashion. At any rate, there appeared none of the paraphernalia I had half expected to find, with which it was said abroad, with an uneasy ridicule, that he might if he wished summon spirits from the vasty deep. Only a man surrounded by books. I may even then, however, have suspected (considering my growing fascination with the miracle of words) that there were formulae sufficient to the occult deed hidden in those old and to me anonymous books.

There was and is, even to a green freshman or a balding mentor, a recognition of mystery in words, distorted to magic very conspicuously in Dr. West's period of "specialization," Renaissance literature. And beyond pretentious magic, one comes upon that mystery again and again, whenever two or three are gathered together in a community bonded by signs. Such, then, with a reflection from a fifty-year distance, was my first encounter of Robert Hunter West, Professor of English, whispered as learned in Medieval and Renaissance literatures and expert in the Occult. A man thereby to be reckoned with by any student (or professor) taking words carelessly, but especially if taken with deliberate intent to manipulate reality to improper ends through abuse of signs—through reducing the mystery of signs to magic by a presumption of control over reality by gnostic alchemy.

What I began to learn from him that afternoon, among the many things I learned from his steady witness in the increasingly shifting academic sands, was his integrity of spirit and mind and body. An integrity increasingly remarkable to behold as the academy was becoming less and less committed to fundamental integrity. Persons like Dr. West were increasingly valued as authority on the comma's use in a careless reduction of him. His concern for the distortions of occult usurpation of the sign (everywhere becoming apparent in the academy) was taken as a sort of intellectual hobby, as his own private entertainment, about which he might lecture occasionally to some group of faculty wives concerned with "literary" questions before a morning coffee and cookies. That is a perspective from the point of view of the "serious" and "progressive" academic administrators and faculty, not from their wives'

perspective—a note necessary at a point when nuance of irony is endangered by the austerity of the politically correct.

Against such integrity as his, sovereign empires were a-borning in the university, in which increasingly there arose specialized professors of limited truths, enthusiastically supported by the popular spirit of the age through legislative largesse. (English Departments, in some panic, began to consolidate various specialties of the comma to survive.) Progress was in the air. And pragmatism as the scholasticism of an increasingly popular progressivism: what would work in the name of progress, measurable by an increasingly sophisticated technology, through which by abstraction reality itself could be professionally "doctored" in a reductionism of fact from truth as governor of all. At the time of my fall visit to Dr. West, or shortly thereafter, there was an event that became anecdote. Dr. West, serving on an "interdisciplinary" committee to approve a thesis in the Education Department, discovered that his name as reader had been signed to the thesis, as a convenience to him. (He had approved it, but campus geography was the moment's complication.) The signatory by a presumptuous proxy, soon to be Education chairman and then Dean, could but be baffled when Dr. West sallied out of Park Hall intent (the anecdotal record says) on thrashing the forger of that academic record. Whatever the precise history giving rise to the anecdote, what I do know is that the miscreant flourished as the School of Education flourished through its increasing control of accreditation of secondary teaching.

Some of my peers who came as green as I and ripening under Dr. West's teaching (a few yet survive) eventually began to address him as "Bob," on reaching Assistant Professor rank. I could not and still cannot do so. Still, he and I became over the years increasingly close friends, one sign of which is that he stood godfather to our firstborn. For many years we shared a small company who met weekly to read Saint Thomas Aquinas and Plato and Dante and others. Four couples of us, the Montgomery newlyweds the youngest. Fierce arguments, high comedy, excursions beyond specialized academic undertakings. It was a context suited to my discovery that community is fundamental to my existence as a person, requiring of me a respect for the variousness of reality in relation to the uncertainty of sign to understanding reality. That was the context in which together we discovered Flannery O'Connor down the road at Milledgeville. Our own lively small community was prepared already to respond to her playful high seriousness and humor and sometimes caustic wit, and we came to know her personally.

Despite my wife's participation and my own with these older and more experienced members, who graciously made us members with all the freedom and responsibilities attendant, I never could speak of him or to him as "Bob." After all, he had already published *The Invisible World*, a study of "Pneumatology in Elizabethan Drama," and was finishing *Milton and the Angels*. (There would follow his *Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery*, and then in his retirement *Reginald Scot and Renaissance Writings on Witchcraft*, as the occult and especially witchcraft reemerged in our world as a naïve repetition of old spiritual errors under the growing auspices of ecumenical intellectual tolerance of it as religion.)

On that old fall afternoon I might well have wondered whether I had been misdirected by that other teacher, a truly grand lady, kind in her deportment to students to the extent that I had been tempted to approach her with my sheaf of poems. Under pressure of enrollment explosion, she was teaching a course called "Contemporary Georgia," a statistical course required of A.B. students. It

was a requirement managed by the text's author, an established professor of sociology, and each year a new edition of the text, enriching the author, replaced the last. (I'm minded, as poet, of the Sears catalogues, but with a difference, to which another anecdote, a conversation overheard by a friend in the men's room at Park Hall. Two country boys from the same county, meeting by chance: "what you takin'?" "Contemporary Georgia." "Contemporary Georgia—what's *that*?" "You know—you learn how many hogs in Georgia and stuff like that." "Humphf! First cold snap, and you won't know nothin'.")

Contemporary Georgia. "Knowledge" a far cry from what one tries to learn about Shakespeare's problems with the "outer mystery" or Milton's with "angels." My "Contemporary Georgia" teacher realized I needed orienting away from statistics about hogs, caught as I was by words, and so she directed me to her old friend, Dr. West, because he was "literary." So there I stood, threatened by thousands and thousands of books, requiring a stepladder to reach them down. Drawn nevertheless by a kindly deference of host to wayfarer, bespectacled eyes tolerant and mannerly but not indulgent of that illiterate and ignorant freshman with his sheaf of poems now long since and happily consigned to oblivion. With this fifty-year distance, I realize that Dr. West was called "literary" to enlarge upon his formal reputation as "scholar." He was both, as is proper, but in a hierarchy of perspective in the terms. There was already in that other teacher—literary herself I came to know—a suspicion of the growing academic emphasis upon dislocation in our academy, engineered by commandeering the term *scholarly* to justify intellectual reductionism, through which specialization could be defined as the ultimate intellectual responsibility of an institution. Ready evidence, such courses as "Contemporary Georgia," in which occurred the dangerous severance of abstract fact from complex truth, and thence an elevation of fact over truth itself, whereby in the end a student might well "know nothin'," though degreed.

From the beginning I discovered in Dr. West a devoted opposition to severing mind and spirit, that first necessity to gnostic empowerment over truth—over reality, as Eric Voegelin puts it. It was not that he didn't know about hogs—he'd worked on farms and knew them as that country boy knew them. That is, he knew about cold snaps and hog killings in a dimension of reality lost to the annual texts of "Contemporary Georgia," a reality still to be known even beyond our latest technologies that now obviate hog-killings, so that every day is as good for appetitive uses of hogs, beyond ceremonies of the seasons. It was through his present witness as intellectual soul incarnate, in the large context of reality, that I was prepared to see how telling was Allen Tate's characterization of modernist dislocations from truth, upon which dislocation the academy was increasingly dependent, solidified by a cumulative effect through courses like "Contemporary Georgia."

As Tate warned, when we extend "immediate necessities into the world" and assume "that the present moment is unique," we abandon reality itself. We thereby become provincialists. "For provincialism is that state of mind in which regional men lose their origins in the past and its continuity into the present, and begin every day as if there had been no yesterday." Thus we become citizen to "the provincial world of the present, which sees in material welfare and legal justice the whole solution to the human problem," entrapped by the necessity of "chance solutions of 'problems' that seem unique because we have forgotten the nature of man." Little wonder, then, a spiritual desperation gives rise once more

to the "occult" and to "witchcraft" in the most progressive moment of our history.

He read those old, forgotten poems of mine, talked with me more kindly than they deserved, but with neither condescension nor a pretense that they were other than what they were, though obscurely in them there must have been something justifying his turning aside from the page in his typewriter—perhaps on Milton's angels. That was a gift in him as teacher I still envy. He was firm in his reading of my helpless words, through which firmness I survived. He did not tell me that they were "good" or especially "interesting," but he began to direct me toward overcoming my illiteracy and general ignorance reflected in those poems. There was in him a *professional* deportment far other than what that term was coming to mean, and it was a contagious deportment continuing in many of his students. What I learned, without quite realizing it at the time, was a participation in an intellectual community through a common address of openness to be shared in the interest of truth. Regardless of the relative intellectual maturity of the student, it is that deportment shared by minds alive that by the sharing toward a common end becomes a continuing community beyond time or place.

What he knew and what he shared as mentor was not a sole possession of his, to be guarded by copyright so to speak, but an intellectual *manner* possible to any soul according to the gifts peculiar to that soul. There grew a shared enthusiasm, governed by reason, whose formulation I was to discover put succinctly by Saint Thomas years later: "The purpose of the study of philosophy is not to learn what others have thought, but to learn how the truth of things stands." What Saint Thomas, and Dr. West, knew of course is that reason nevertheless requires our knowing "what others have thought." The error possible, which has come to dominate the academy through reductionism dependent upon opinion polls, is to suppose that the knowing of the *what* as statistically established is the end of knowing. That way lies a wandering in shifting sands—into the morass of a variety of "Contemporary" disciplines, whatever "hogs" they deal with. Instead, he held firmly an intellectual deportment to the way things stand in truth—the calling of *homo viator*, whatever one's degree of gift. A most various calling to the discovery of gifts peculiar to each person, pursued through a humility *toward* and not pride *in* gifts—intellectual or other. That was the deportment witnessed to me.

Out of all this remembrance, what am I to summon as Dr. West's gift to me, his student? He knew widely and in many modes what others have thought, but not inordinately. For he was not like Aldous Huxley's young modern who declares to his wiser father that he (the son) is "interested in everything" indiscriminately, to which the father responds, "the same as being interested in nothing." Dr. West was openly interested in every *thing* he encountered, visible or invisible, but according to its proper degree of thingness and place in the orders of nature. Thus he proved steady witness to a manner proper to human nature, that of an ordinate lover of things under the auspices of existence as a unique person. Indeed his was that deportment of soul for which there is no check box on administrator's or student's evaluation forms such as follow the academy's empowerment through specializations, the compartmentalizing of minds not in the light of gifts but toward provincial conveniences.

Toward the end of his service to the University of Georgia there had emerged, despite his resistance, a rejection of such professional deportment as his. In fact, deportment like his was characterized by one of the new administrators as but

a residue of "our former insignificance." Our president proclaimed that his faculty would be ideal when it had no faculty member who had been "on board" longer than ten years. To a faculty increasingly restive, his chief navigational officer, the "provost," tried for reassurance: the president, he said, was "knocking himself out night and day going to bat" for the faculty. Soon thereafter, in the midst of a court suit over grade changes to make football players "eligible," the Vice President for Academic Affairs assured the court that grades were administratively changed because "we prefer to err on the side of making a mistake."

Remembering the shifting academic sands in which Dr. West made his determined way as *homo viator*, what may I say then suited to his memory? For, while piety requires of my service to the "permanent things" which were his concern that I ordinately honor such souls, that honoring is best when turned toward the permanent things, lest memory atrophy to nostalgia about our fathers. That is one failure of some of us as traditionalists—a popular charge against us traditionalists. Thus arrested, the remembered things and persons become mere ghosts and not continuing presences to us in our own journeying. What I still know, through Robert Hunter West's continuing presence, is the certainty of presences beyond the world's immediate shadows, though to speak too certainly in the midst of those shadows is to risk presumption. It is to forget the embounding of soul by human nature itself, through which, still enduring the world, we must remember our potency not yet fully actual. We must remember through actively enduring the world as *homo viator*. That is one of the problems we still have with angels, envying the immediacy of their fullness by nature, even as we more and more deny their actual existence. Suchare the conditions to human intellect, distorting memory by desire toward gnostic presumptions over the shifting world.

At the risk of cryptic presumption, then, in memory of Dr. West, but toward service to the permanent things as primary responsibility. That is a turning whereby our fathers release us but do not abandon us in our reflective journeying, we being still unfulfilled souls at large in this curious wood of the world. We do not always know when we speak prematurely along the way, lacking that fullness of witness as "historical" person bracketed by dates (1907-1988). That is why what "others have thought" can only point us toward the truth of how things stand to us on our journeying, requiring of us duration—an *enduring*—of the journey. Indeed, that proves the problem with those once popular student evaluations of their teachers, which so soon gave way to radical assaults on teachers and upon the academy itself from within. There now follows a deconstruction of curricula, not only of "Contemporary Georgia" courses but also of courses in Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton.

The Saint Thomas and Rabbit Hunters would have it that there must be at least a consent to teleological principles defining the potency of any body of members, and most especially those pretending bodies called academies. For the gift of existence to member or body has inherent in it the teleological limit of unity both to person and to community of persons. By that limit, man as intellectual soul orients his stewardship to being in relation to the mystery of the *one* and the *many*. But the academy has long since chosen to abandon that orientation, in favor of constituting itself the warehouse of parts—tails and stomachs and hearts reduced to sovereign parts (despite false rhetorical strategies that appear contrary to the intent). Each part with its disorienting advocates is advertised to the social and political ends

suited to community as if sufficient to perfect wholes—under the rubric of *specialization*. Only by *ad hoc* actions, in points of crisis to community, do we attempt to build some creature suited to point the vaguely threatening bird (the reality of truth itself) as required to rescue appetitive progress and avoid crisis. Little wonder that such collectively dismembered creatures, through the magic of technology, end as random creatures which seem to find, as Yeats might put it, "a love on every wind."

My own deportment to the abiding questions, then, is to witness my mentor indirectly, maintaining truths learned of Dr. West. He believed in his responsibility to the University of Georgia's motto: *et docere et rerum exquirere causus*. It is a motto one no longer finds imprinted on local plaques nor alluded to in "commencement" exercises at what is now nationally and internationally known as the home of the "Georgia Bulldogs." I do not despair at last. I learned from Dr. West the importance of steady witness—learned that only when I have lived in the steadying presence of past witnesses to the truth of things, with fear and wonder and awe—am I likely to exorcise my own propensity to intellectual and spiritual pride, or to an arrogance and anger in response to such frustrating circumstances. Only thus may I earn and maintain membership in that community of intellect that abides creation, a community independent of the accidents of time and place.

Through such local duration, in company with presences such as Plato and Saint Thomas and a host of witnesses to this present moment, including now Robert Hunter West, I may approach a fullness of my own discrete, limited being in bearing ordinate tribute to the past presences still with me, member in that body of witnesses to the permanent things. In doing so, perhaps I may become acceptable witness of hope in the continuing intellectual body, upon whose continuing presence tomorrow's pilgrim must depend. That is the best tribute one may bear to one's mentors. One must continue as a good student to the mystery of being itself, through which witness one—however partially according to partial gifts—is member in the truth of how things stand.